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041353Z May 05

UNCLAS HO CHI MINH CITY 000451

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/BCLTV, DRL/IRF

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: HCMC CELEBRATES THE 30TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE END OF THE WAR

1. (U) Ho Chi Minh City threw an elaborate celebration to mark the 30th anniversary of the end of the war and the reunification of the country. The cornerstone of the April 30th event was a three-hour parade followed by speeches from Communist Party national and city leaders. In the reviewing stand was a virtual who's who of the Communist Party of Vietnam: General Secretary Nong Duc Manh, former General Secretary Le Kha Phieu, President Tran Duc Luong, former President Le Duc Anh, Prime Minister Phan Van Khai, retired General Vo Nguyen Giap, Speaker of Parliament Nguyen Van An and former Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet. Cuban Defense Minister Raul Castro was among the handful of senior foreign dignitaries to attend. There was no anti-U.S. animus evident at the parade.

2. (SBU) In their keynote speeches, President Luong and HCMC Party Secretary Nguyen Minh Triet broke little new ground. They focused

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on the central role of HCMC in Vietnam's economy and lauded the role of the Party in guiding the city's transformation into a "modern socialist city." Both emphasized the need for HCMC and Vietnam to overcome "shortcomings" and to take the "necessary steps to sustain economic development." Although the speeches focused on national reconciliation, Luong and Triet still used phrases such as "servant government" to characterize the Republic of South Vietnam. A public concert the previous evening portrayed the Viet Cong and Vietnamese villagers suffering under B-52 carpet bombing and Agent Orange defoliant spraying in the South during the war, but the tens of thousands of spectators -- the vast majority born after the war ended -- were far more interested in the dancing, singing and fireworks that followed the war-time retrospective. True to HCMC's spirit, by Sunday, many of the decorations had been removed and it was back to business as usual.

3. (SBU) There was a staged, potemkinesque feel to the entire official event. For the parade, the police closed downtown HCMC and even local Vietnamese residents were "encouraged" to stay at home. The marchers paraded through empty streets, although Vietnamese television made sure the parade looked good. Similarly, HCMC police went door-to-door in many neighborhoods to ensure that storeowners and residents displayed Vietnamese flags. If not, the police sold and mounted the flags at a nominal cost.

4. (SBU) We understand that there was friction behind the scenes over the content of the speeches given at the event. A reliable contact close to former PM Kiet told us that HCMC Party Secretary Triet had asked Kiet to comment on a draft of his speech. Kiet reportedly told Triet that he found his speech bland and disappointing. He urged the HCMC Party Leader -- and Politburo member -- to use the event to challenge hardliners and to make a bold call for internal party reform and faster international integration. Triet demurred, according to our contact.

WINNICK